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A description of the
Rogers bronze door at the
Capital



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Samuel Douglas Rogers

A DESCRIPTION
OF THE
ROGERS' BRONZE DOOR,
AT THE CAPITOL.
ACCOMPANIED WITH A DIAGRAM.*

This magnificent Door opens out of the old Hall of the House of Representatives upon the corridor leading into the new Hall.

It was originally designed to occupy this place, but Thomas U. Walter, Esq., "Architect of the United States' Capitol Extension and the new Dome," who also was the architect of the "Girard College, at Philadelphia," very judiciously remarks in his Annual Report of 1862:—

This "is not a suitable place for it, as there is nothing in the location that requires such a door, nor is there any reason why an opening so entirely subordinate and unimportant in the design of the building should be embellished with so magnificent and expensive a work of art.

"The door which closes this opening should correspond with the main entrance door of the present Hall of Representatives which stands opposite to it. Besides, it could never be seen to any advantage;—standing in the common thoroughfare through the building it would never remain closed during the sessions of Congress; its valves would necessarily be always folded back into the jambs, thus sacrificing the whole effect of the composition.

"In view of these considerations I respectfully recommend that this door be placed in the Eastern Front of the centre building, and be made to constitute the principal entrance to the Capitol. In this situation its elaborate decorations would be seen to advantage, having the full benefit of light and shade, and there would be nothing to prevent its occasionally remaining closed."

*Entered according to an Act of Congress, in the year 1863, by the Author in the Clerk's office of the District of Columbia.

In his Annual Report for 1863, just made public, Mr. Walter thus resumes the subject of the location of the Door:—

“I objected to this locality in my last Annual Report, and gave several reasons why it would be preferable to place it at the principal entrance of the old Capitol. I find, however, after having seen the door, that it is not at all suitable for the exterior entrance of such a building; it has too much fine detail for outside exposure in a climate like this, and were it placed in the centre of the Eastern Front, as proposed, its surroundings would not be in harmony with so elaborate and magnificent a work of art.

“The Eastern Portico of the old building will certainly be taken down at no very distant day, and the front be extended eastward, at least, to the front line of the wings, so as to complete the architectural group, and, at the same time, afford additional accommodations to the legislative department of the Government.

“When this improvement shall have been put in progress, the vestibule may be made a leading feature in the building, and it may be so designed as to be in harmony with this door, which can then be removed and made to serve the purpose of an inner or vestibule door, where it will be protected from the weather, and where the architecture in connection with it will be consistent with its form and in harmony with its design.”

What effect these remarks and recommendations may have upon the final disposition of the Door cannot, of course, as yet be known.

This, however, is certain, that the windows on each side the corridor scarcely afford sufficient light to read with ease the grand illuminated Page of History, which the Door really is.

FASHION OF THE DOOR.

The Door is of solid bronze, and weighs 20,000 pounds. Its whole height is seventeen feet and its width nine feet. It is believed to be the only work of the kind thus constructed in the world.

The Door is folding or double, and the view given in our necessarily meagre outline Diagram is of it as it appears when closed.

It stands sunk back inside of a casing, also of bronze, that projects about a foot forward from the leaves or valves. On this casing each side of the Door, are four figures, at the top and bottom, representing Asia, Africa, Europe, and America. A running border, emblematic of conquest and navigation, occupies the space along the casing between them.

The Door has eight Panels beside the semi-circular one at the top. In each one of these Panels is a separate picture.

The back of the Door is plainly finished. Each of the Panels there has only a circular moulding inclosing a centre star.

This whole work was designed by Randolph Rogers, an American artist, and modeled by him in Rome, in 1858. It was cast in bronze by F. von Muller, at Munich, and finished by him, awaiting the order of Government, in 1861.

The work is delicately minute in all its details. A single figure is in itself a gem of art. The grouping of the scenes is highly effective and each picture is as defined and expressive as a line engraving. The work is in *alto relievo*—the figures projecting almost entirely out from the surface.

THE STORY THE DOOR TELLS

Is the HISTORY OF COLUMBUS and the DISCOVERY OF AMERICA.

The Panel containing the earliest scene in the life of the great Admiral, is the lowest one on the left hand side, and in our Diagram it is marked

I.

It represents "Columbus undergoing an Examination before the Council of Salamanca." He is seen here zealously unfolding his grand theory to his bigoted audience.

This Council at last, after long delays, decided "the project vain and impossible ; and not becoming great princes to engage in on such slender grounds as had been adduced."

The Panel above it marked

II.

Contains "Columbus' Departure from the Convent of La Rabida," near Palos. He is just setting out to visit the Spanish Court.

It was to this Convent he had come weary, and on foot, with his little son Diego, begging bread for him, his heart saddened by poverty, debt, and hope deferred. He was received kindly by the pious fathers and lived here a long time. Juan Perez, prior of the convent, a former confessor to Queen Isabella interested himself deeply in his affairs and through him and the Lady Beatriz de Bobadilla, a favorite attendant of Isabella, the queen was induced to send Columbus 20,000 maravedis, about seventy-

two dollars, equivalent to two hundred and sixteen dollars of the present time, to enable him to make a respectable appearance at court. It was while staying at this Convent that he also formed the acquaintance of Alonzo Pinzon who sailed with him in his first voyage to America.

The Panel marked

III.

Is his "Audience at the Court of Ferdinand and Isabella." In this picture the queen, seated in state, leans forward and seems deeply interested in what Columbus is saying. The king, by her side, with chilling apathy evidently regards him as a visionary.

The next Panel is the top one of this half of the door, and is marked by us

IV.

Its picture represents the "Starting of Columbus from Palos" on his first voyage. He is here confiding his son to the monks before he embarks. His ships lie waiting in the harbor.

THE TRANSOM PANEL

Occupies the semi-circular sweep over the whole door. The extensive picture here is the "First Landing of the Spaniards in state at San Salvador."

The top Panel on the other leaf of the door, and marked in our Diagram

V.

Contains the first of the sad pictures of the Door, and represents the "Earliest Encounter of the Discoverers with the Natives." In it one of the sailors is seen bringing an Indian girl on his shoulders a prisoner to his ship.

The Panel next below this one, marked

VI.

Has in it "The Triumphant Entry of Columbus into Barcelona." It is full of the glory of success and waving banners; all the halo of rose-color seems now to light up the future of the great Discoverer.

But in the Panel below this is represented a very different scene. It is numbered

VII.

And is "The Admiral in Chains."

Don Francisco de Bobadilla, sent out by the court to investigate charges preferred against Columbus, had him, thus disgraced, sent back to Spain. When on board the vessel, upon the officers there wishing to relieve him of his chains, he replied with deep feeling:—"I will wear them as a memento of the gratitude of princes!"

In the next Panel, the

VIII.

Is the "Death scene." Columbus lies in bed. The last rites of the Catholic Church have been administered;—friends and attendants are around him;—and a priest holds up a crucifix for him to kiss, and upon it bids him fix his dying eyes.

Columbus returned from his last voyage poor, sick, and disconsolate. True, previous to his starting on this voyage, the charges against him had been all cleared away, and the vain, weak headed Francisco de Bobadilla was drowned with his crew on their voyage home. But, now his friend Queen Isabella was dead. The king looked coldly upon the man who had given him an empire.

Columbus landed near San Lucar, and from thence proceeded to Seville where, to quote his own words, he "had no place to repair to except an inn, and often with nothing to pay for his sustenance."

He sought redress at the Spanish Court by means of friends and letters, but failed in all. After painful delays, sometimes carried on a litter, he at last succeeded in reaching Segovia in Old Castile, where the Court then was, but all his renewed endeavors to obtain justice were futile.

Columbus died at Valladolid, the 20th of May, 1506, aged about 70 years. His last words were, "*In manus tuas, Domine, commendo spiritum meum.*" "Into thy hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit." Those closing eyes doubtless opened upon a new discovery—that far brighter land than the Western Antilles, the gold of which is not corroded with blood, or care, nor ever dimmed with tears.

[NOTE.—Upon the Door itself there are no marks of numbers on the Panels as in the Diagram—this numbering was introduced to enable our description of it to be more easily understood.]

The funeral obsequies of Columbus were celebrated in great pomp in the parochial church of Santa Maria de la Antigua, in Valladolid, and his remains interred in the Convent of St. Francis. In 1513 they were removed to the Carthusian monastery of Las Cuevas, at Seville.

In 1536 they were taken from Spain to the island of St. Domingo where they remained over two hundred, and fifty years. From there, again, in 1796, they were removed in great pomp to Havana and now rest in the Cathedral of the Capital of Cuba.

THE STATUETTES.

On the Door, on the sides and between these Panels, are sixteen small statues, set in niches, of eminent cotemporaries of Columbus. Their names are marked on the Door, as well as

on the Diagram where they are printed in the positions they occupy on the Door.

Beginning at the bottom, on the side from which we started in numbering the Panels, we find the figure occupying the lowest niche is

PEREZ. Juan Perez de Marchena was prior of the Convent of La Rabi-da, the early and ever firm friend of Columbus.

The niche above this is occupied by CORTEZ, the conquerer of Mexico.

Above him again stands OJEDA. Don Alonzo de Ojeda was an early Spanish adventurer to the New World,—of patrician birth. He possessed great bravery and endurance, but lacked fealty to the illustrious Admiral.

VESPUCCI occupies the next niche on the door. It is, perhaps, not generally known that among the friends of Columbus whom he trusted during his last dark days was numbered Amerigo Vespucci.

Then come, opposite in line across the door, standing in two niches, side by side, MENDOZA and ALEXANDER VI.

Pedro Gonzales de Mendoza, Archbishop of Toledo and Grand Cardinal of Spain, at an early period patronized the cause of Columbus. His influence at court was great, and he is sometimes facetiously called "the third king of Spain."

Alexander VI. was a Roman Pontiff. He was a native of Valencia and born a subject to the crown of Arragon. He was an able and politic sovereign, although represented by history as a perfidious, bad man.

Then follow, below them, ISABELLA and FERDINAND, King and Queen of Spain.

Beneath them stands the LADY BEATRIZ DE BOBADILLA, marchioness of Moya, the early friend of Columbus, and favorite of Queen Isabella. Beside her is

CHARLES VIII., King of France, a prince of the house of Valois. He died 1498, aged 28 years.

The first figure of the lowest pair on the door is HENRY VII., of England, the Richmond of Shakspeare's play of Richard III. and grandfather to the Queens Mary and Elizabeth. He was a patron of navigation, and seemed disposed to regard with favor the theory of Columbus, which was presented to his notice by Bartholomew the brother of the Admiral. But, already, the discovery had been accomplished. Beside him, stands

JOHN II., King of Portugal. This monarch declined accepting the proposals from Columbus made him previous to his application to Ferdinand and Isabella.

Then, in the same line with them, across the Panel, is

PINZON. Martin Alonzo Pinzon commanded the "Pinta," one of Columbus's little fleet of three vessels. It was he who first saw "Land," September 25, 1492: eventually his friendship died out and he proved treacherous to Columbus. He died a victim to grief and bitter mortification.

In the niche above Pinzon stands B. COLUMBUS, the brother of the Admiral, and appointed by him *adelantado*, or lieutenant-governor of the Indies.

Then comes VASCO NUNEZ DE BALBOA, a Spanish discoverer and adventurer, born in 1475. It was he who crossed the isthmus of Darien and on September 29, 1510, first saw from a mountain the Pacific ocean.

In the niche above, again at the top of the Door, stands the figure of FRANCISCO PIZARRO the conqueror of Peru.

THE HEADS ON THE DOOR.

Between the Panels and at top and bottom of the valves of the Door are ten small projecting heads. They are indicated on the Diagram by round outline dots.

These heads, or rather those "between the Panels," are described in Mr. Walter's Report as "representing historians who have written on his (Columbus') voyages from his own time down to the present day, ending with Irving and Prescott."

All endeavor to obtain further certain information relative to the heads has resulted in disappointment. Mr. Walter offered an examination of all his correspondence with the artist that might throw light upon the subject, but he himself had stated already, as above quoted, all that could be thus elicited. The two heads at the tops of the valves are evidently female heads, while the two next the floor possess markedly Indian characteristics.

Above, over the transom arch, on the casing of the Door, looks down, over all, the serene grand head of COLUMBUS.

Beneath this head of Columbus, the AMERICAN EAGLE spreads out his widely extended wings.

Besides all that there has been attempted to describe, the rest of the Door is covered with emblems, banners, and heraldic emblazonry, relating to the times and the people that figure in the historic lessons, impressed upon its ponderous leaves.

COST OF THE DOOR.

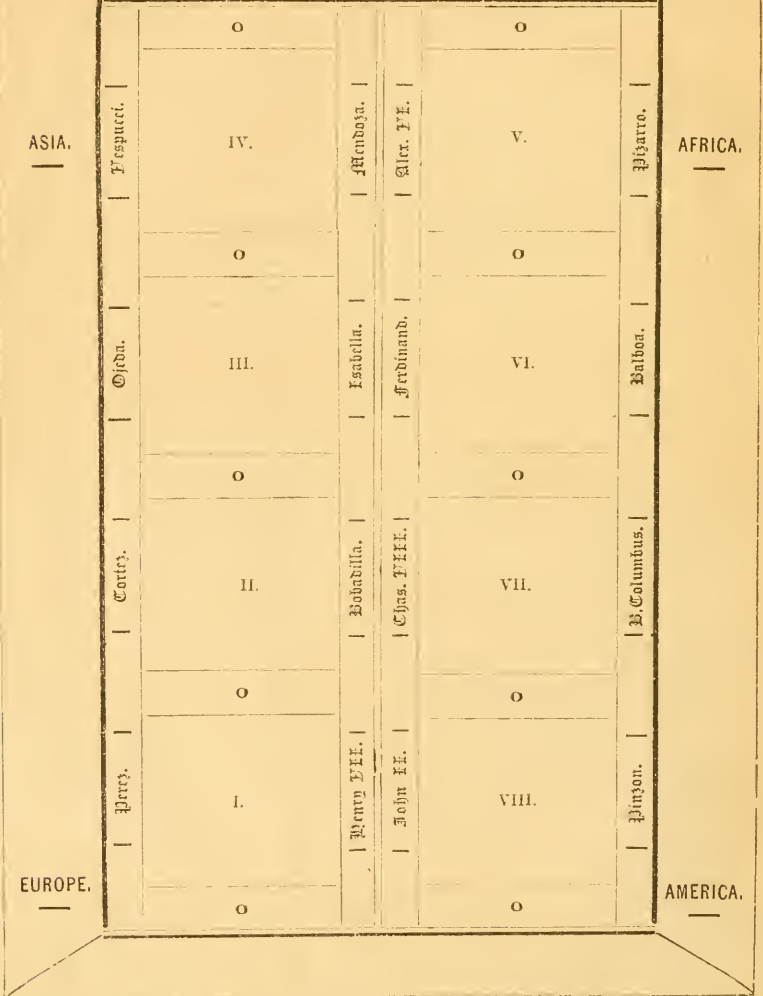
The cost of the Door was about thirty thousand dollars, in gold.

The above "DESCRIPTION OF THE DOOR," &c., is printed from pages of a Book now in Press, the first number of which will be published early in 1864, entitled "The Federal City; or Ins and Abouts of Washington." By "Solus," a newspaper correspondent.

*

COLUMBUS.

Transom Panel.



Outline Diagram of the Door.

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